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Exploring Fatal and Non-Fatal Violence Against Parents Challenging the Orthodoxy of Abused Adolescent Perpetrators

ABSTRACT

An examination of scholarly literature concerning fatal violence (i.e. parricide) and non-fatal violence towards parents reveals dominant themes of mental illness, child abuse and pathology based on a research paradigm that focuses on adolescent perpetrators and, to a lesser extent, elderly victims. This article presents a critical analysis of this literature and argues for a more contextualized approach to the study of violence against parents. It is argued that criminologists should widen their methodological lens to examine this issue from a life course perspective and draw on conceptual tools such as *developmental pathways*, *sources of conflict*, and *intersectionality* to allow for an analysis that can offer new ways of thinking about violence towards parents.

Key Words: *Parricide; Parent Abuse; Violence Against Parents (VAP); Intersectionality; Youthcentric Violence*

Parent abuse refers to a “pattern of behavior that uses verbal, financial, physical or emotional means to practice power and exert control over a parent” (Holt, 2013, p. 1) while *parricide* refers to the killing of a parent or a stepparent by an offspring (Shon, 2014). While the connection between parent abuse and parricide may seem obvious, given that both operate along a spectrum of *violence towards parents*, such logical and expected links have not been made in the divergent sets of literature. Discussions about parricide rarely draw on research concerning non-fatal violence towards parents and, similarly, the literature around violence towards parents rarely addresses parricide. These absences tend not to be acknowledged; when they are, they are often justified by drawing on the work of Heide (1992) or Walsh and Kreinert (2009) who suggest that each phenomenon is unique and distinct in terms of its offender/victim profiles and incident characteristics (e.g., see Cottrell, 2004).

Over the past 30 years, the centrality of the ‘adolescent offender’ has been hugely influential in the emergence of both ‘parricide’ and ‘parent abuse’ as fields of enquiry. However, it may be worthwhile to look beyond such an adolescent-centered framework in the violence against parents literature for one important reason: legal adults (i.e. those defined as over the age of 18) constitute the bulk of the offenders in parricides, with international data finding that adult offenders range from 75% (Heide & Petee, 2007) to 91% (Holt, in press) of all parricide offenders. In the literature on *non-fatal* violence against parents, there is no existing robust data on the proportion of adult offenders to adolescent offenders. However, victim surveys tell us that a significant number of violent offences, including physical assault, are committed by adults against family members (e.g. Walby et al, 2014) and anecdotal data suggests that parents are not excluded from being victimized. However, rather puzzlingly, research on such violence also focuses exclusively on adolescent perpetrators. The exclusion of adults from research is surprising for the simple reason that parents are at risk of fatal and non-fatal violence throughout their lives, from both their teenage children and their adult children. This paper attempts to understand why adults have been so frequently left out of the research and subsequent theorizing about violence against parents, and makes four suggestions as to how theory and research about violence toward parents can move forward.

Opening a Dialogue across Disciplines

The absence of dialogue between scholars who research parricide and parent abuse may be because each field of enquiry has tended to be examined by scholars from different disciplines, each operating within its own set of assumptions. For example, psychoanalysts, psychologists and psychiatrists have dominated the study of parricide, with ‘mental illness’ a frequently suggested explanation (Vo & Myers, 2012). When sociologists and criminologists have examined parricide, analysis has focused on the age, gender and other socio-demographic patterns in offending and victimization (Heide, 2013; 2014) and on the common characteristics of offences such as weapon use (see Heide & Petee, 2007). In contrast, social workers, domestic violence specialists, family therapists and youth justice academics have dominated the study of parent abuse, resulting in a tendency to frame the issue as a problem of ‘dysfunctional families’, rather than one of criminal violence (Holt, 2013).

Such distinct disciplinary perspectives coincide with methodological preferences. Most of the parricide research conducted by criminologists has tended to use large, aggregate datasets such as the Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) or National Incident Based Reporting

System (NIBRS). Consequently, although trends over time, victim and offender characteristics, and weapons used in homicide incidents have been identified in the literature, the offences that precede parricide remain unknown due to the hierarchy rule embedded in reporting systems.ⁱ A second common source of data used in parricide studies analyses psychiatric case and forensic evaluations from adult offender populations (Liettu et al., 2009): here, preceding offences and behaviours are subsumed under the broad explanatory umbrella label of ‘mental illness’. In parent abuse studies, research has tended to draw on large-scale surveys measuring the prevalence of ‘violent incidents’ (e.g. Ullman & Straus, 2003) or on criminal justice data that identifies ‘indictable offences’ (e.g. Gebo, 2007). Each of these methods takes an ‘incidental’ approach to the phenomenon, and such an approach produces a series of snapshots of the problem with little attention paid to factors that precede fatal and non-fatal violence against parentsⁱⁱ. While some parent abuse studies have drawn on qualitative interviews with victims to explore family histories (e.g. Stewart et al., 2007), few have undertaken longitudinal research which might tell us something about the antecedents and consequences of such offending.

We do not find such scholarly division in the study of other forms of family violence. In the case of both intimate partner homicide and child killings, the risk factors that precede them such as sexual proprietariness, jealousy, and physical violence (in the case of IPH) and child abuse and the presence of a stepparent (in the case of child killings) have been crucial to how each has been constructed as a global social problem (Dawson, Pottie, & Balde, 2009). Consequently, both of these forms of family violence are analysed through a developmental lens with the concept of ‘violence escalation’ over time central to such analysis (Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). In contrast, violence against parents is not considered a social problem and is not subject to similar developmental analyses.

Finally, there may be conceptual problems as to why the dialogue is absent. For example, the broad conceptual category of ‘intrafamilial homicide’ tends to lump together parricide with every other form of homicide in a domestic setting, including intimate partner homicide, siblicide, and infanticide (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008). Given the relative rarity of parricide, this method of conceptual organization means that it sits on the margins of domestic homicide. However, violence towards parents is not insignificant when considered within the wider context of family violence and homicide. For example, in England and Wales it is estimated that 35.3 per cent of non-fatal domestic abuse against adults is perpetrated by family members of which son/daughter is likely to represent a significant proportion (Walby et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is estimated that parricide constitutes 3-4 per cent of all homicides in Westernised societies (such as North America, Western Europe and Australia) (e.g. Holt, in press). This statistic does not differ from the proportion of parricides identified a hundred years ago (Chilton, 2002, p. 907).

We need to think about new ways of re-positioning *violence towards parents* (fatal and non-fatal) from the margins of the family violence literature to a position that enables a contextualised and balanced examination of its significance to and relationship with other forms of family violence. This recalibration is necessary because violence against parents is correlated with a number of other configurations of family violence – with earlier experiences of child abuse (Ullman & Straus, 2003; Margolin & Baucom, 2014); with witnessing IPV (McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2010); with perpetrating contemporaneous sibling abuse (Laurent & Derry, 1999) and with perpetrating IPV in later years (Laporte et al., 2009;

O’Leary et al., 2004). Thus, there is a clear need to situate violence against parents more centrally in relation to other forms of family violence.

For these reasons, it is essential that we open the conceptual and methodological dialogue and examine the intersections between parent abuse and parricide and explore the continuities (and ruptures) of *fatal* violence and *non-fatal* violence towards parents *to make visible* the gendered and generational factors that shape it. In this paper, our first objective is to extend the parameters of violence towards parents (fatal and non-fatal) from the almost exclusive research focus on *adolescent* perpetrators to *all* perpetrators. Our second objective is to offer suggestions for thinking about how the field(s) of parent abuse and parricide might be conceptualised in a way that gives full attention to how the age *and* gender of the victim and offender intersect at the point of violence. We argue that such an approach may offer a panoramic view of offenders and victims in ways that are both sociologically and developmentally sensitive.

Current scholarship on fatal and non-fatal violence towards parents

a) The construction of the adolescent perpetrator

The notion of violence against parents is permeated with conceptual ambiguity, and this is reflected in the terminologies used. ‘Parricide’ is a term generally used to refer to the killing of one’s mother or father. The term was once used to define the killing of other elderly family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and is still used in this way in some cultures (e.g. South Korea) (Kim, 2012). However, over time there has been a shift toward a narrower definition and a consequent focus on the parent as victim. This definitional shift may be a product of socio-political changes brought on by industrialization and the ensuing reconfiguration of family structures, changing the very meaning of self-identity in the context of nuclear families (Rotundo, 1993). However, over the past 25 years definitions have narrowed further as the term *parricide* has been used almost interchangeably with *adolescent parricide* (Evans, McGovern, & Peric, 2005).

In contrast to the broad consensus around the single term *parricide*, a range of terms are used in the literature to refer to violence towards parents. In much of continental Europe and Asia, it is commonly referred to as *filial violence* (e.g. Kumagai, 1981) or *filio-parental violence* (e.g. Pereira, 2015). Much of the research produced in the United States, Canada, Australasia and the UK makes explicit reference to children or young people in its terminology, using terms such as *child-to-parent violence* (or ‘CPV’), *adolescent-to-parent abuse* or *youth aggression in the home*. Despite this range of terminology, one common theme is the operation of tightly-bound age parameters. As with parricide, violence against parents almost always refers to *adolescent violence*. Research in this field generally applies a lower age limit of around 13 years and an upper age limit of around 17 yearsⁱⁱⁱ, although occasionally research has extended the age limit as far as 24 years.

Consequently, *adult* violence towards parents is all but absent from the literature on fatal and non-fatal violence towards parents, and this ‘bracketing off’ of adult offenders presents particular challenges when attempting to explore its trajectory across the life cycle. But why has

there been such a focus on *adolescent* offenders? The scholarly focus on adolescence seems a strange preoccupation when, as explained in the Introduction, we know that cases of parricide overwhelmingly involve adult offenders and that estimates from victim surveys suggest a significant 'dark figure' of adult perpetrators of non-fatal violence towards parents. Yet the preoccupation with adolescents persists. We suggest three explanations for this persistence.

First, towards the end of the twentieth century, a handful of adolescent-perpetrated parricide cases that took place in the United States captured the attention of the public, researchers and legal scholars. In 1982, Richard Jahnke Jr., a 16 year-old boy, shot and killed his father, and the trial that followed highlighted the role of child abuse and maltreatment in parricide, amid claims that Richard Jahnke Sr. was an abusive father who "brutalized his children" (Strong, 1988, p. 29). Seven years later a second case of adolescent parricide similarly drew attention to the role of child abuse in its perpetration when Eric and Lyle Menendez killed their well-to-do parents in Beverly Hills, California. In the sensationalised (and broadcasted) trial that followed in 1993, their attorneys argued that prolonged sexual and physical abuse led them to kill their tormentors: their father and his unwitting accomplice, their mother. While similar 'mega-cases' have not emerged in other countries, Heide and Boots (2007) have found that cases of parricide that involve child and adolescent offenders are significantly more likely to be reported in the media than parricide cases that involve adults. Similarly, in the UK, the only example of non-fatal violence towards parents to be broadcast on mainstream television for a national audience is the documentary 'My Violent Child', produced by Popcorn TV for Channel 5 and now onto its second series. In 'My Violent Child', the parents' role in the child's violence is always emphasised, and the 'solution' takes the format of an expert coming into the home and facilitating changes in parents' behaviour. This youthcentric dominance in media discourses holds for homicides in general and criminal behaviour even more generally, and has coincided with a toughening of youth justice policy (and, in particular, parental responsibility laws) throughout the United States, Canada and the UK since the 1990s (Holt, 2008; Muncie, 2008). The foregrounding of such cases is notable not only for constructing adolescents as the 'typical perpetrator' of violence against parents, but also for constructing 'problematic parental behaviour' as its 'typical context'. This is a point to which we return.

Second, the adolescent focus can be explained by the broad trends in the academic discipline of criminology. Spurred by a sociological tradition traceable to the work of Donald Sutherland (Laub & Sampson, 1991), some fields of enquiry within academic criminology have disproportionately focused attention on adolescence, for example through large-scale surveys on high-school students to measure self-reported delinquent behaviours (e.g., Moffitt et al., 1996). Due to their confinement in age-related groups, adolescents offer an easy-to-access large research population and one consequence of Adolescent-Limited Criminology (ALC) is its oversight of both early /middle childhood, and adulthood from theory and research into crime trajectories (Cullen, 2011). In cases of both parricide and non-fatal violence towards parents, academic research has unduly focused almost all of its attention on adolescence and ignored both adult offenders and the various contexts in which adult offspring kill or otherwise intentionally harm their parents.

Third, the adolescent focus can be explained by trends within the respective fields of parricide and parent abuse. In relation to parricide, two seminal publications emerged in the 1990s that focused only on adolescent-perpetrated parricides: *When a Child Kills* (1991) by Paul

Mones and *Why Kids Kill their Parents* (1992) by Kathleen Heide. As well as furthering the idea of parricide being an adolescent-specific crime, both of these publications cemented the role of 'child abuse' as key causal factors in its perpetration. Paul Mones was a defence attorney who represented adolescent parricide offenders, and he suggested that his clients had been abused as children. Consequently, he argued that the killing of a parent represented an act of 'self-preservation' (Mones, 1991). Similarly, Kathleen Heide is a criminologist who examined several adolescents who had killed their parents, and argued that such cases are the product of maltreatment and abuse (Heide, 1992). In relation to parent abuse, a similar narrative can be applied to the emergence of key publications in this field. The first academic paper to be published on the topic of non-fatal violence against parents is generally recognized to be Harbin and Madden's *Battered Parents: A New Syndrome*, published in 1979 in the United States. As evident from its title (and journal), this paper offered a somewhat medicalised approach to this issue, and limited its focus on perpetrators aged 20 years or younger. Since then, in line with the trend for ALC, research on parent abuse has continued its focus on adolescent perpetrators, whether drawing on data from large-scale epidemiological youth surveys such as the *National Survey of Youth* (e.g. see Agnew & Huguley, 1989) and *Youth in Transition* (e.g. see Peek at al., 1985) or from criminal justice data obtained from the youth courts (e.g. Kethineni, 2004; Gebo, 2007). To date, all of the US/European published academic books on parent abuse continue this trend, including *When Teens Abuse their Parents* (2004) by Cottrell; *Adolescent-to-Parent Abuse* by Holt (2013); and *Adolescent Violence in the Home* (2015) by Routt and Anderson.

Despite this scholarly preoccupation with adolescence, research data on adult violence perpetrated against parents is available. Once the victims reach an age where they are (somewhat ethnocentrically) defined as 'elderly' (i.e. 65 years and over), knowledge about their child's violence towards them can be found in the academic field of *elder abuse* – a field often dominated by gerontology and health studies. For example, in some surveys it is reported that adult children are the principal offenders in over a third of cases of elder abuse, making them the most likely offenders in all cases of elder abuse (Powell & Berman, 2006; Brownell & Wolden, 2003). Similarly, in relation to parricide, Krienert and Walsh's (2010) analysis of *eldercide* (defined as any homicide of a person over the age of 65 years) found that 17.3 per cent of all offenders were the offspring of the victim. However, situating knowledge about violence against parents within the field of 'elder abuse' is a challenge because its unit of study is not *family violence* but *age-related violence* and one has to make a concerted effort to search findings about specific relationship dynamics within this literature. But once other possible relationship dynamics within the data have been bracketed out, there is often little detail left to explore.

To summarise, it appears that the research field of fatal and non-fatal violence against parents shares common traits. Both fields of enquiry emerged around the same time – towards the end of the twentieth century – and they both emerged as a result of the ascendancy of particular methodological orientations. Both fields of study parallel some of the broader contours of criminological scholarship by making adolescents the principal subjects of their analysis. And while gender is attended to in such analyses, it is only at the superficial level of recognising that such offences are most likely to involve male perpetrators and, in the case of non-fatal violence, female victims. Furthermore, the absence of any developmental context severely limits the theoretical possibilities of understanding how gender and age might

intersect in the emergence of violence against parents. As it stands, both 'age' and 'gender' are under-theorised because they are considered only as homogenous and static abstract categories of the self, rather than as continually-evolving axes of power which are shaped throughout the life course and which intersect with each other and with other axes of power such as dis/ability, 'race' and social class. We now turn to one of the consequences of this 'youthcentricity' and explore how it has served to stultify our understanding of violence towards parents.

b) The construction of the abused perpetrator

As suggested in the previous section, early studies of parricide involved forensic evaluations of juvenile offenders by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists in the form of clinical case studies (Sadoff, 1971). Frederic Wertham, one of the pioneering theorists in parricide studies, explained adolescent parricide as 'catathymic violence': pent-up anger and frustration that is released against a parent as a form of self-preservation to protect their self-identity from psychic and physical disintegration (Strong, 1988). These early works tacitly suggested that the killing of a parent was a reaction to prolonged maltreatment at the hands of a sadistic and cruel parent, the killing an inevitable and liberating resolution (Galatzer-Levy, 1993). Following Wertham's seminal work, Heide's (1992) 'adolescent parricide offender' (APO) typology has shaped the parricide discourse for the past 20 years by producing a *de facto* theory through the formation of three 'types' of offender: (i) the severely abused child, (ii) the severely mentally ill child, and (iii) the dangerously antisocial child (Heide, 1992). The 'severely abused child' type explicitly supports this psychoanalytic and clinical scholarship, while the 'mentally ill child' type, where children kill their parents during a recurring schizophrenic and psychotic episode, and the 'dangerously antisocial child' type, where children commit parricide for instrumental reasons, both implicitly corroborate this theoretical paradigm. In her later book some twenty years later, Heide (2013) acknowledged her earlier over-emphasis on adolescent parricide offenders, and re-phrased her typology to 'parricide offender type' (Heide, 2013; 180) to include *all-aged* offenders, including an additional type – the 'enraged parricide offender' (p. 18) – in the process. However, the legacy of her earlier typology is evident throughout the dominant criminological narrative of parricide, whereby adult offenders (which make up the majority) are marginalized while the adolescent parricides are constructed as problems of youth related to child abuse (Wasarhaley, Golding, Lynch, & Keller, 2013).

Theoretical frameworks that have attempted to explain non-fatal violence towards parents are a little more varied but no less individualistic in their focus on (i) psychopathologies of the child (ii) violence and trauma in the child's history (iii) problematic parenting practices. In terms of psychopathologies, some studies have examined the prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses within clinical and criminal justice populations where there is evidence of adolescent violence towards parents. In such cohorts, studies have identified above-average numbers of young people with a clinical diagnosis of neurodevelopmental disorders^{iv} (such as autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), mood disorders (such as depression or anxiety disorders) or with schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders^v, including 'borderline personality disorder'^{vi} (e.g. see Perera, 2006; Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2010). Despite clear methodological limitations when comparing such studies because of cultural differences

in diagnosis, changing definitions of diagnostic categories and sampling biases^{vii}, such research has provided a powerful narrative for both practitioners who can offer an ‘explanation’ for parents who are desperate for answers, and for parents themselves who find relief from blame and access to resources in the presentation of a clinical diagnosis (Clarke et al, in press).

In terms of the traumatic and/or violent histories of the child, the introduction to this paper identified a number of studies that found correlations between a child’s history of abuse (whether as a primary or secondary victim) and subsequent non-fatal violence towards parents. While by no means conclusive (and many studies have *not* found such correlations), these findings enable a range of psychological discourses to be drawn on in the development of theory. For example, psychoanalytic notions of retribution (along the lines of Wertham’s notion of ‘catathymic violence’) have been suggested, in that anger and resentment about past abuses are either targeted towards the figure who enacted the abuse, or displaced onto the (often also-abused) parental figure who ‘allowed’ it to happen (e.g. Cottrell & Monk, 2004). Alternatively, ideas from the school of behaviourism have been put forward in cases where there is a family history of IPV, suggesting that violence is transmitted through the generations via processes of observation and reinforcement (Ibabe & Jaureguizar, 2011). Related explanations have drawn on attachment theory to suggest that attachment bonds between caregiver and child have not sufficiently developed in early childhood, producing later emotional disconnection between adolescents and their parent(s). Such a model has encouraged problematic operationalisations of ‘attachment’ through the use of quantifiable ‘indicators’ such as *parenting style* and *feelings of closeness* which are then correlated with incidents of violence towards parents (Paulson et al., 1990; Contreros & Cano, 2014).

In contrast, theories regarding adult-perpetrated violence towards parents are almost non-existent. In the case of parricide, researchers have prioritized the role of mental illness in adult offenders (Feldsher & West, 2010), but there is little else. In the case of non-fatal violence, there is a theoretical vacuum because the problem is not recognized until it becomes subsumed under the category of *elder abuse*. Within the elder abuse literature, some theorists have posited the idea that perpetrators have psychopathological ‘personalities’ such as narcissistic, sadistic or ‘controlling’ personalities (Ramsey-Klawnsnik, 2000). Other theorists have again drawn on psychoanalytic theory to suggest that abuse and violence towards elder parents is borne of revenge or retaliation for earlier experiences of victimisation at the hands of the parent (Payne, 2005), or in response to current experiences of not feeling sufficiently appreciated or rewarded for their caregiving role (Brandel et al., 2007). Despite the elder victims and their perpetrators operating at an entirely different stage of the life course, the same canonical explanatory frameworks that focus on adolescent violence have nonetheless been applied to them. There is little explanation as to why such pathologies or resentments took many decades later to emerge.

Although such an *adolescent-focused* and *abuse-centered* view of violence towards parents may be informative, such a narrow conceptualisation delimits the many other situational, sociological and developmental contexts that shape violence against parents. We are concerned that such an omission has severely stunted the evolution and maturation of theory for both offence categories. The remainder of this article makes four specific suggestions as to how theory and research in this field can move away from the mainstream and pursue more fruitful avenues.

Moving forward in research and theory about violence towards parents: Four suggestions

1. Remove age parameters from research examining violence against parents

Removing age-caps from research investigating violence against parents opens up the possibility of exploring the issue from a developmental perspective. The criminal justice data indicate that the peak age of *youth* offenders who commit offences that involve violence towards parents is 15 years (Walsh & Krienert, 2007). However, there are two critical points to make here. First, this age will vary depending on the age of criminal responsibility and it is those countries that have the lowest age set (e.g. England and Wales; United States) that have been most frequently publishing such research. More recent research from Spain, which has a higher age of criminal responsibility, has found a higher 'peak age' of such offending (Contreras & Cano, 2014). Second, all of these studies have applied age parameters to their research population, so that the 'peak age' figure is not the peak age of *all* offending against parents (though it is sometimes interpreted as such), but the peak age within a limited range that reflects the beginning and end of adolescence.

Similarly, research around elder abuse and 'eldercide' also limits its age parameters, and this limitation is equally problematic. Situating knowledge about violence against parents within the field of 'elder abuse' means that analysis inevitably focuses on a stereotypical age-related context based on an assumption of physical frailties and vulnerabilities related to the victim's advancing years.^{viii} This presupposition is already the case with IPV, where understandings of older women who experience domestic abuse in the home tend to emphasize physical decline and 'dependency needs' at the expense of a broader gendered and developmental analysis (Lombard & Scott, 2013). By only considering adult violence towards parents as a subset of the larger category of *elder abuse*, further details concerning the case characteristics of adult to parent violence is lost. This condition presents a challenge when attempting to understand the family dynamics and conflicts that produce such violence; family violence *may not necessarily* be related to age-related processes but may have more to do with relationship processes related to a particular stage in the lifecycle and which intersect with gender.

There may also be technological and cultural factors that affect the gender dynamics within families (see Adler, 2006). For example, in both their analysis of elder abuse (Krienert et al., 2009) and eldercide (Krienert & Walsh, 2010), the authors found that *female victims* are more likely to be abused or killed by an intimate or family member, while *male victims* are more likely to be abused or killed by an acquaintance or stranger. The only explanation that the authors offer for this finding is that it 'might be indicative of the nature, type, and culture of care that the elderly receive' (Krienert et al., 2009, p. 340). However, this finding about the gendered dynamics of victimisation aligns with more general findings from criminological research, in that males of all ages are more likely to be killed by acquaintances and strangers while women are predominantly killed by those with whom they are in an intimate and/or family relationship (e.g. see Walby et al., 2014). This example illustrates how the application of age parameters in family violence research can prevent understanding such violence within a broader gendered and developmental framework.

2. Examine the developmental pathways into (and out of) violence against parents

As outlined in the introduction, existing research into violence against parents indicates that there may be a number of developmental pathways into its perpetration, including mental illness, developmental disorders, witnessing domestic violence, poor attachment patterns and family stress (see Holt, 2013 for a summary). These interacting biological, psychological, social and cultural contexts will differentially shape the experiences of both offenders and victims depending on their stage in the life course. For example, whether perpetrating it or being victimised by it, a child involved in domestic violence in the family home will have access to different financial, legal, social and physical resources compared with an adult, and is likely to respond differently.

However, thinking developmentally about family violence is about more than accounting for the subject's stage in the life course: it is also about tracking changes over time. In a recent study about the breakdown of adoption placements, Selwyn et al. (2014) found that violence towards parents was reported in 57 percent of cases (n=70) and, within this sub-group, the researchers identified 'early-onset' violence towards parents in 80 percent of cases. In 'early onset' cases, the children were also experiencing complex and overlapping difficulties (including biologically-based impairments, poor cognitive capacity and low self-esteem) which were recognised as features of developmental trauma (Schmid et al., 2013). Although these difficulties intensified during puberty (thus highlighting the importance of life course stages), challenging behaviours were evident from an early age. The remaining 20 percent of cases represented a second pathway, whereby the violence emerged and rapidly escalated during adolescence ('late-onset violence') and which were not characterized by other complex difficulties. Other research which has interviewed parents about their experiences of violence from their child has similarly found that, while in the majority of cases, the violence is reported to emerge suddenly during the onset of adolescence (i.e. around 12 years), for some parents problematic behaviour is recognised at a very young age, often from as young as five years (although it is unlikely to have been labelled as 'violent' or 'abusive' while the child was so young^{ix}) (Howard & Rottem, 2008; Holt, 2013).

Similarly, developmental analyses of fatal violence towards parents have identified specific pathways into parricide. For example, Shon and Barton-Bellessa's (2012) historical analysis of 220 parricide offenders in nineteenth-century America found that 16 percent had a documented history of institutionalization (i.e. prison), previous criminal behavior (i.e. arrest) and 'difficult' temperaments and personalities which were evident in their interactions with family and nonfamily members early on in their development. Thus, in some cases, killing a parent may represent the culmination of an offense trajectory. Detailed case reviews, which are now a formal requirement following a domestic homicide^x in many Westernised countries, reveal common developmental and contextual precursors to cases of domestic homicide and indicate how fatal and non-fatal domestic violence often represent a continuum of violence and controlling behaviour involving the same population (e.g. Jaffe et al, 2013). We suggest that scholars working in the field of fatal and non-fatal violence against parents would benefit from such probing analysis within their own fields.

3. *Examine the sources of conflict through a gendered generational framework*

Research has identified the role of 'asking patterns' in the precipitation of specific violence incidents in cases of adolescent non-fatal violence towards parents. That is, the young person may ask the parent for something (e.g. to borrow the car, for a loan of money, for an extension of a curfew) and the parent's refusal of this request produces an abusive incident (Price, 1996; Eckstein, 2002; Haw, 2010). Initially, such incidents may be verbal, but over time incidents tend to escalate into physical violence and/or emotional abuse (Jackson, 2003; Eckstein, 2004). These sources of conflict reflect the everyday culturally-prescribed desires and lifestyles of a particular generation of adolescents and, in and of themselves, the requests from young people do not appear to be extraordinary. This finding, in itself, would suggest that violence towards parents is not borne of profound pathology, but is a product of mundane family processes, the nature and extent of which are shaped by an interaction between different generational (e.g. adolescent/parental) and gendered (e.g. maternal/paternal) preoccupations. Thus, conflict between child and parent does not end once the child reaches adulthood, and the gendered and generational dynamics continue to shift as child and parent transition through life. For example, survey research suggests that boys are increasingly more likely to physically assault their fathers (rather than their mothers) as they age, a shift which does not hold for girls (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Peek et al., 1985).

Furthermore, historical and cultural analyses of parricides suggest that the sources of conflict between parents and their offspring change throughout the life course (Toivo, 2015). Analysis of textual sources such as court records and newspapers^{xi} suggest that son-on-father parricides generally followed the typical contours of confrontation between two men. Similarly, son-on-mother parricides emerged from banal disagreements about chores, food preparation and other arguments of a trivial and domestic nature. Thus, rather than focus on the profoundly atypical (as with research that has focused on the psychopathology of the offender), it would appear that a more interactional approach that examines the gendered and generational sources of conflict in cases of violence towards parents may be useful in our theoretical understanding because it enables an analysis in ways that are sensitive to changes in social and cultural norms and practices (Shon, 2014). Such an approach requires an examination of conflict between parents and their offspring throughout the life-course: the dominance of the idea that adolescence is a time characterized by conflict with parents^{xii} has done much to obscure the idea that such conflict often continues throughout the life course.

4. *Develop new ways of theorizing gender in family violence more broadly*

The need to attend to the gendered dimension of violence against parents is clear. In terms of *perpetration*, evidence suggests that males perpetrate most violence against parents, at a ratio of 9:1 for parricide (Heide, 2013) and 8:2 for non-fatal violence (Holt, 2013). However, in terms of *victimization*, mothers and fathers are equally at risk (Heide, 2013) of fatal violence, and mothers are most at risk of non-fatal violence by a ratio of 8:2 [mother: father]. However, the latter statistic is based on violence perpetrated by adolescents, and analysis of elder abuse data suggests that this gender ratio shifts over time, such that the ratio of elder victimisation by adult offspring is 6:4 [mother: father] (Krienert et al., 2009). As outlined above, to understand this intriguing shift over the life course, we need to prioritise a developmental perspective that takes account of the family's, and family members', situational contexts, their generational

roles and expectations and the ways in which these intersect with gender. However, as identified at the start of this article, little theoretical attention has been paid to the gendered dimensions of violence towards parents. Instead, we might look to how other forms of domestic violence have been theorized to identify ways of moving forward on this. For example, taking an intersectional approach (see Crenshaw, 1991) to conceptualizing IPV has been found to be helpful in recognizing how the experiences and consequences of particular oppressions, such as violence in the home, need to be understood as the product of not only gender and generation, but of age, dis/ability, 'race', social class and cultural context (e.g. O'Neal and Beckman, 2016; Brassard et al., 2015). Furthermore, poverty, child-care responsibilities, housing policy, employment practices, friendship patterns and police attitudes are all shaped by multiple and intersecting forms of oppression and will shape how different parents experience and respond to violence from their offspring. We also need to be mindful of how these intersecting axes of oppression shift throughout the life-course – for both parent and offspring – and how this will also shape experiences of and responses to violence towards parents. For example, it has been consistently found in parents' reports of adolescent violence that parents do not 'fight back' (see Holt, 2013 for summary). Despite feeling both physically and psychologically overwhelmed by their child, the legal and social context of the parent-child relationship at this stage in the lifecycle means that there may be serious ramifications for parents who do physically 'fight back' against someone who is legally, nominally and developmentally still a child. Indeed, parents have reported that, during abusive interactions, they are scared to hit back because they fear it will be misinterpreted as child abuse (Eckstein, 2004). However, once the child reaches adulthood, the socio-legal context of the parent/offspring relationship changes and it may be that 'fighting back' becomes more acceptable. This change will inevitably shape the nature and quality of the violence and, potentially, the consequences, which may be fatal. Current intersectional approaches that theorise IPV perpetration and masculinities may also be useful in our consideration of the extent to which violence against parents may represent an attempt to (re)assert masculinity (e.g. see Hearn & Whitehead (2006) and Campbell et al., (2007) for their work on this in relation to IPV). Indeed, there have been calls from those researching intimate partner violence to include violence against parents in their analyses to really understand the *sociological significance* of domestic violence (Hearn, 2014). Thus, while existing research on IPV can certainly be used to help develop our thinking about violence against parents, it may also be the case that research in *this* field can contribute to our understandings of family and intimate violence more broadly (Holt, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have identified the common linkages between *parent abuse* and *parricide*. Although violence towards parents occurs throughout the life course, the literature in both fields disproportionately centers its attention on adolescents, with a small amount of attention focused on elderly victims. We have argued that this lopsidedness can be attributed to factors such as evolution of criminology as a discipline, the ascendancy of a particular methodology

and the import of seminal theorists and high-profile cases. In addition, we have argued that the emphasis on parental wrongdoing as a causal factor in parent abuse and parricide (on a spectrum from dysfunctional parenting to 'child abuse') has resulted in the near total exclusion of adults from the academic discourse in both fields. Instead of continuing to plough these (well-worn) furrows, we propose new ways of thinking about and researching violence against parents.

To that end, we make four recommendations to help us move forward in researching and theorizing about violence toward parents. We argue that violence against parents should be nestled in the broader context of family violence (that is sensitive to the gendered and generational contexts of victims, offenders and whole families as they move through their life cycle. Furthermore, we have highlighted the potential usefulness in analysing the sources of conflict between parents and their offspring across the life cycle rather than focusing only on 'adolescents' as the perpetrators and on 'child abuse' as the causal factor. We contend that once violence against parents is analysed in a more contextualized, developmental and intersectional way, other conflicts between parents and offspring, will be illuminated.

Looking to the past may offer additional ideas about why parents and their offspring become embroiled in lethal conflicts. While historians have fruitfully explored a range of documents to identify the sources of those conflicts which led to fatal and non-fatal violence against parents (e.g. Toivo, 2014, 2015; Willumsen, 2015) an analysis of such sources of conflict in adulthood is missing from the contemporary criminological literature due to the preoccupation with adolescence and adolescents and a reliance on aggregate datasets (e.g. SHR) that neglects the nuances involved in adult-on-adult conflicts throughout the life course. One way of reconciling the current stultified state of the literature may be to incorporate the rich work of historians of crime (e.g., Adler, 2006; Hanawalt, 1979; Roth, 2009; Sharpe, 1984), thereby historicizing parricide. For future works, the use of archival data such as court records, coroner's reports, and newspapers in quantitatively and qualitatively-designed studies may be one way of moving beyond the use of aggregate datasets.

As we have argued here, one of the main limitations in previous theoretical frameworks is the simple extension of adolescent theories to adulthood, without an adequate account of the lull in between and after. This omission needs addressing given the shift in gendered dynamics that appears to take place somewhere between adolescent-perpetrated violence, and violence against elderly parents. Non-fatal and fatal violence against parents may more usefully be viewed on a continuum, and while research into parent abuse and parricide has evolved along different trajectories, they need not continue travelling in divergent ways. There is reason to synthesize the findings and integrate the theories of both forms of violence. We argue that a developmental view of violence against parents represents the most theoretically cogent and consistent framework with which to pursue the problem. While the problem of aging has often focused on elderly victims, it is also relevant for offenders, for they too must negotiate the intricacies of adolescence, early adulthood, adulthood, and impending old age.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports and Supplementary Homicide Reports only count the most serious crimes: if a parent is kidnapped, beaten, tortured and killed, only the homicide is recorded in the offense count, not the total number of offenses that occurred.

ⁱⁱ Furthermore, many surveys underestimate the frequency of such offences through the practice of 'capping'. For example, the *Crime Survey for England and Wales* (CSEW) caps the number of incidents that can be reported within a 'series incident' at five. Because family violence tends to constitute series incidents (rather than singular incidents), this practice significantly impacts on the measurement of such crimes.

ⁱⁱⁱ The upper age limit of 17 years reflects the definition of 'child' as set out by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (1990). This is an international human rights treaty which 192 UN countries have ratified and must comply with in their own government policies and procedures. The only two countries *not* to implement the convention are the United States and Somalia (UNICEF, 2004).

^{iv} Neurodevelopmental disorders is a diagnostic category used in the current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) and includes intellectual disabilities, communication disorders, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, specific learning disorder and motor disorders (APA, 2013).

^v Schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders is a diagnostic category used in the current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). It includes schizophrenia, catatonic disorders, schizoaffective disorder and delusional disorder.

^{vi} Borderline personality disorder is one of a number of disorders categorized under 'Personality Disorders' in the current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). Other disorders listed under this diagnostic category include Anti-social personality disorder, Avoidant personality disorder, Narcissistic personality disorder, Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, Schizotypal personality disorder and Personality disorder trait specified.

^{vii} Samples are often taken from psychiatric populations where inevitably there will be higher-than-average prevalence rates for psychiatric disorders

^{viii} On the other hand, parents who do not fit into the 'elder' category (i.e. are under 65 years) are *never* considered to have dependency needs of which they might rely on their child. These needs might be related to health, finances or language/communication, and may play a factor in the development of an abusive relationship dynamic.

^{ix} In these parental reports, it was often during adolescence when parents actually became frightened of their child.

^x For example, Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) in Canada and England and Wales; Domestic Violence Fatality Reviews (DVFRs) in the United States.

^{xi} We would argue that such methods offer a useful way of examining violence against parents in comparison to the more commonly-used methods such as aggregate datasets, which (i) do not contain enough details about the sources of conflict surrounding the relationship (they often contain only the comment 'argument' under the 'circumstances of offence' category), and (ii) apply Heide's APO model in the identification of categories, which prevents analytical categories emerging from the data.

^{xii} This discourse was perhaps instigated by G. Stanley Hall's (1904) pioneering analysis of adolescence, which he defined adolescence as a period of *sturm und drang* (i.e. storm and stress) characterised by conflict with parents.